

# Federal Labs: Might a Link To Industry Aid Research?

WASHINGTON  
**T**HE Office of Management and Budget has provoked debate in the scientific community by suggesting that the laboratories of the National Institutes of Health be converted to a private research center, financed by government, industry and foundations.

Budget officials, who want the National Academy of Sciences to evaluate the proposal, say it is consistent with President Reagan's philosophy of "privatization." Because the Government labs offer lower salaries than many universities and industry, they say, continued Government control may actually threaten the pre-eminence of the N.I.H. as a center for biomedical research. But many scientists said the idea portended an alarming Government abdication of responsibility.

Dr. Robert K. Oldham, scientific director of Biotherapeutics Inc., a private cancer research company in Franklin, Tenn., and Dr. Joshua Lederberg, a Nobel laureate who is president of Rockefeller University in New York, discussed the idea with Robert Pear, a reporter in the Washington bureau of The Times.

## Joshua Lederberg Why Disturb a Jewel?

**Question.** What is your reaction to the idea of converting the laboratories of the N.I.H. into a private research center?

**Answer.** My first reaction is to wonder why in the world disturb a system that has been one of the jewels of American scientific and medical accomplishment. I have heard of no problems with the operation of N.I.H. so severe that they would require such a drastic change. If anything of that magnitude is ever to be considered, then it should be done only after extensive hearings. Perhaps one should look at the fundamental picture of the whole U.S. investment in biomedical research.

**Q.** The Office of Management and Budget has suggested that perhaps the laboratories of N.I.H. should be a free-standing research institute similar to Rockefeller University. Is your university a suitable model?

**A.** Historically, there is some truth to that comparison. The Rockefeller Institute was founded in 1901 to be this country's principal initiative in fundamental medical research. However, the N.I.H. is at least ten times as large as Rockefeller University. The sudden privatization of an enterprise of that magnitude has structural, organizational, financial implications, and implications for the careers of many gifted individuals.

**Q.** The budget office says there is strong industrial interest in biomedical research and its applications.

**A.** Well, there certainly is more industrial interest. But there is not any substantial university that can garner more than about 10 percent of its research support from industrial sources. At our own institution, it's more like 2 or 3 percent. The notion that there is a huge fund of money out there ready to be made available for basic research is absolutely a fallacy. There is, of course, a large private-sector investment in the applications of biotechnology. But that is a very different proposition.

**Q.** Most of your budget at Rockefeller University comes not from the private sector, but from what?

**A.** The principal source of support of every academic research establishment is the Federal Government. Something close to one-half of our total budget comes from grants made by the N.I.H. and other Federal agencies. It would be impossible for the research establishment to function without that very generous support. Converting the N.I.H. to a private academic laboratory would absolutely necessarily involve essentially the same expenditure of Government funds, unless the purpose was to shrink the enterprise. If that is the purpose, one should have some arguments about the cost-effectiveness of the research. And I'm sure the N.I.H. would come out very, very well in any candid appraisal of the costs and the enormous benefits of its research.